

# Finnish Highly Skilled Migrants and the European Economic Crisis

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**Abstract:** *Europe is home to a globally unique area where the barriers of transnational migration have been largely removed. This article focuses on Finnish highly skilled, intra-European migrants and their labour market situation immediately following the economic crisis of 2008. Based on two consecutive online surveys (carried out in spring 2008 and summer 2010) of tertiary educated Finns living in other EU countries, the article examines the effects of the global economic downturn on the careers of these highly skilled migrants. Only 16 per cent of the respondents report that their labour market situation had worsened. A higher percentage (24%) felt that their situation had improved and the majority (54%) had either experienced no change in their situation or stated that their reasons for changing jobs or moving had nothing to do with the crisis. The article concludes that these migrants were protected from the full force of the crisis by their high human capital, flexibility of alternating between studying and work, employment in international workplaces and their intra-European migrant status.*

**Keywords:** *economic crisis, European Union, free movement, highly skilled migration, intra-European migration, labour markets*

## 1. Introduction

The principle of free movement of labour within the European Union (EU) was conceived in the early days of the European integration process as a way of stabilising the supply of flexible labour among the original Member States of the European Economic Community (EEC). What began as a measure founded in the post-war guest-worker era logic of free moving workers serving the interests of growing economies, has developed into a globally unique system, where European citizens are entitled to unparalleled mobility rights within the area comprised of 28 EU Member States and 4 countries belonging to the European Economic Area.

Transnational mobility within the free movement area is so easy that it has been said to resemble *internal mobility* rather than *international migration* (e.g., Favell, 2008a; Recchi & Favell, 2009). Developments in IT-technology as well as cheap airlines, bus lines and fast train connections have made both virtual interaction and physical travel easier. Intra-European migration is motivated by work, personal and affective relationships, and quality of life (Recchi, 2008), and Europe currently displays a number of overlapping migration systems. For example, after accession to the EU in 2004 and 2007, most of the 12 new Eastern and Central European Member States experienced significant outmigration. This applied also to the Baltic countries Estonia, Lithuania and Latvia (e.g., Krisjane Berzins & Apsite, 2013; Anniste *et al.*, 2012). While the impact of mobility from these new Member States has been extensively studied (e.g., Favell, 2008b; Glorious *et al.*, 2013), less is known about mobility from Finland and Sweden, the Nordic countries that joined the EU already in 1995.

This article focuses on the immediate effects of the global financial downturn, which spread to Europe in the autumn of 2008, on the labour market situation Finnish highly skilled migrants living in the EU-15 countries.<sup>1</sup> Since the mid-1990s, more than 145,000 Finnish citizens have moved to other EU Member States (*Statistics Finland*, 2017). Free movement is one of the founding principles of the EU and hence intra-European migrants, like the Finns of this study, are entitled to many rights that migrants arriving from outside the EU/EEA area do not have immediate access to. Intra-European migrants should, at least in theory, face no discrimination and their right of residence is determined by European treaties rather than national immigration policies (Recchi & Triandafyllidou,

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<sup>1</sup> EU-15: Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Ireland, Luxembourg, The Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, and the United Kingdom.

2010), and their right of residence can only be limited by reasons related to public policy, public security or public health (e.g., Junevičius & Daugėlienė, 2016).

When the economy prospers it is often customary for native workers to leave the low-wage jobs and seek other employment options, thus promoting the demand for flexible, foreign labour (Fassmann & Lane, 2009). The United Kingdom and Ireland, for example, benefited from the surge of post-accession migrants from Eastern and Central Europe after the EU's eastern expansion (McKay, 2009). The situation may change with the economic cycle, as a crisis fuels anti-immigrant sentiments and migrants have to face discrimination from the native population (e.g., Kapoor & Vereva, 2014; Billiet Meuleman & De Witte, 2014). Immigrants often share the demographic characteristics of groups that are most likely to lose their jobs during a recession, such as low-education levels or poor language skills. They are also more likely to work in cyclical industries and jobs, such as in the construction or the service sector, easily affected by economic trends. Immigrants serve as a labour reserve, and as those with the shortest work history, are often the first ones let go when companies downsize. Unauthorised status and lack of education tend to make the situation even worse. (Orrenius & Zavadny, 2009; Galgóczi, Leschke & Watt, 2012; Tilly, 2011)

The effects of the greatest economic crisis since the 1930s (Hemerijck, Knapen & van Doorne, 2010) were severe in Europe: in the first years of the crisis the GDP dropped by 4 per cent, public debt rose to unprecedented levels and more than 4 million jobs were lost in 2009 alone (European Commission, 2010). There was also an impact on migration: based on Eurostat figures, Tilly (2011) calculated that the growth rate of the foreign-born population within the countries of the EU-27 decelerated by half from 2007–2008 (6.5%) to 2008–2009 (3.2%). This article examines the immediate effects of the economic crisis from the viewpoint of one intra-European migrant group: highly skilled Finns. Did their migration background make them the first ones let go when the economy ground to a halt? Or were they treated similarly with the country's own nationals even at the onset of an economic crisis?

## 2. Working in Europe: the study on highly skilled Finns living abroad

This article is based on two consecutive *Working in Europe* (WIE)<sup>2</sup> online surveys that targeted highly skilled Finns living in EU-15 countries (n=194) and interviews with selected participants (n=18)<sup>3</sup>. In the first survey (2008), the respondents were asked about their career background, international experiences, and reasons for moving abroad. The follow-up survey (2010) to the same target group focused on the effects of the economic downturn and the interviews on their career paths (2011). The design of the study was based on qualitative methods and the surveys were based on non-probability sampling and participant self-selection. While the data thus cannot provide generalisable information on all Finns living abroad, it does, however, present an interesting view into the situation of a hard-to-reach population living across Europe.

The sample included 149 female (77%) and 45 male (23%) respondents who in 2010 were on average 34 years old and had lived in their current country for seven years. While the youngest respondent was aged 25 and the oldest 47 years old, 33 respondents were in their 20s, 126 in their 30s and 35 in their 40s. A significant share of respondents had headed for London, Europe's leading global city. A clear majority lived in the large EU countries: during the first survey 84 per cent of all the respondents lived either in the UK, Germany, France, Belgium, or Spain. In 2010, a quarter of all respondents had moved to a different country: 30 had returned to Finland, 9 moved to another EU country, and 9 to a non-EU country. All respondents had completed, or were currently finishing, a higher education degree. In 2010, 33 per cent of the respondents were married, 39 per cent co-habiting and 28 per cent were single. Most respondents (68%) did not have children.

The data provides a view to the immediate effects of the crisis on the migrants' labour market situation between 2008 and 2010 (Figs. 1 & 2). The share of those in full-time employment in 2010 is lower (63%) than two years earlier (77%). However, the difference can largely be explained by the higher share of those in freelance, self-employed, and part-time jobs (10% to 19%) and those on parental leave (3% to 7%), rather than a rise in the numbers of those who are looking for a job (3% to 4%) per se.

<sup>2</sup> The surveys were conducted by the author, see Koikkalainen, 2013.

<sup>3</sup> There were 6 male and 12 female interviewees, who lived in Austria, Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, Portugal, Spain and the UK.

Figure 1. Working in Europe (WIE) survey 2008: respondents' employment situation

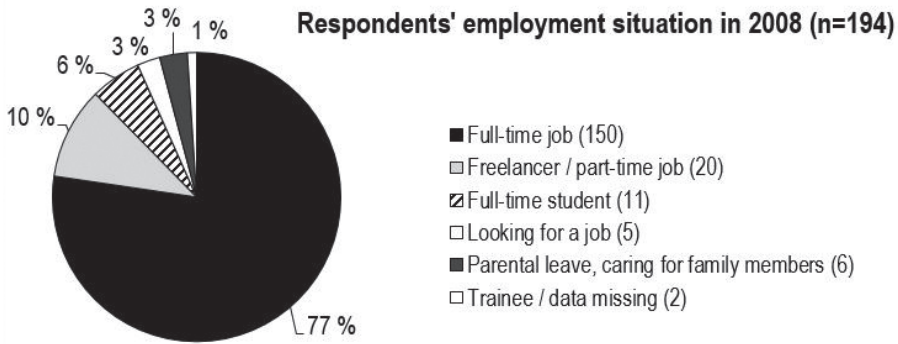
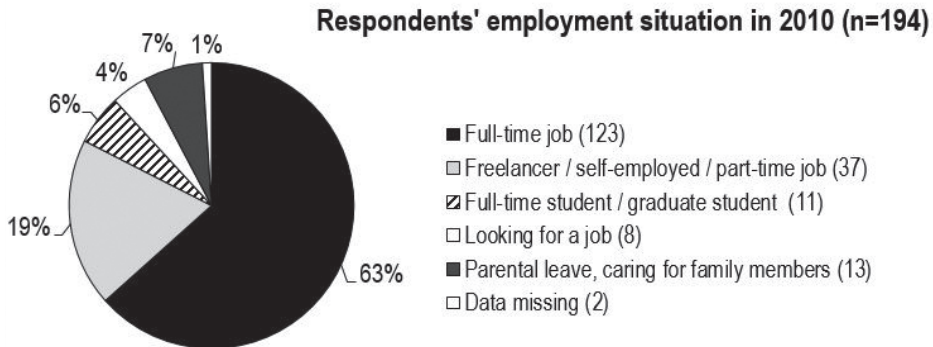
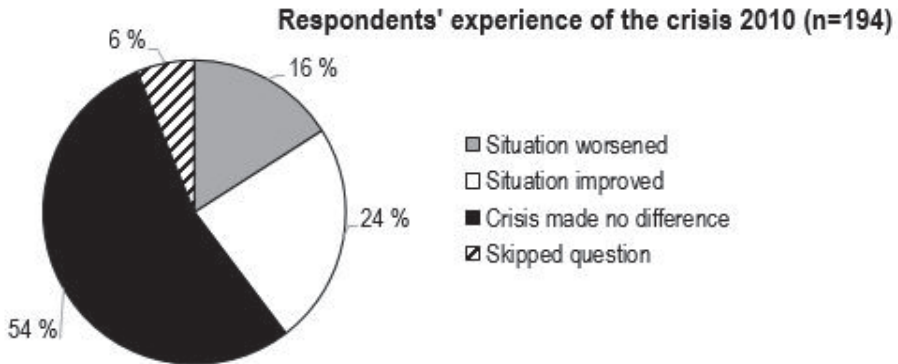


Figure 2. Working in Europe (WIE) survey 2010: respondents' employment situation



The process of European integration has not touched the lives of all European citizens in the same way: it is more likely for the well educated, the professionals, the wealthy, and the young to identify with Europe and to take advantage of what it has to offer (e.g., Fligstein, 2008). The experiences during a crisis of the young and educated WIE respondents can, therefore, reveal something interesting of how the European labour market operates and give a more nuanced view that goes beyond mere unemployment figures. Based on the replies to an open-ended question “*Has your own work situation changed since 2008, for example due to the economic crisis?*” the respondents were coded into three categories: *the situation worsened*, *the situation improved* and *the crisis made no difference* (Fig. 3). In the following sections, the impact of the economic crisis from 2008 to 2010 on the lives and careers of Finns living abroad are discussed through these three scenarios.

Figure 3. Working in Europe (WIE) survey 2010: respondents' experience during of the economic crisis



## 2.1 The situation worsened

Increasing unemployment figures are an important signifier of labour market problems as changes in the employed versus unemployed ratio can be easily followed. However, losing one's job is not the only impact that a recession may have on individual workers, and during such times immigrants may be willing to accept jobs well below their qualification (Khattab & Fox, 2016). In the WIE data, the respondents who reported that they had suffered from the economic downturn were a minority: only 16 per cent explained that their position is worse in comparison with the pre-crisis situation in the spring of 2008. Some reported increased insecurity, while a handful wrote that they had been fired, experienced a pay cut or been forced to relocate abroad. The response from a female respondent is fairly typical, as it reflects the change in the dynamism of the London job market:

*I was a student in 2008, now I am working. There are not many jobs available, even though I live in the capital city. The situation is getting even worse in the autumn because of the cuts planned by the conservative government. I work, but the job is not exactly what I would like to do, but there are not that many options at the moment.”(ID236<sup>4</sup>, b. 1970, MA in social work).*

London is a key destination on the intra-European migration map (Braun & Arsene, 2009; Ryan & Mulholland, 2013). Global cities like London are important locations for skilled migrants because of the concentration of banking and

<sup>4</sup> Each respondent is identified by a unique survey respondent ID number.

specialist employment opportunities of corporate headquarters with their fast-track careers and high salaries (Beaverstock & Hall, 2012). London is Europe's main global city for accountancy, advertising, finance, consultancy, law and many other business sectors. It is, therefore, symptomatic that even this global city was affected by the recession, and the effects of the crisis were felt profoundly by some of the survey respondents. As this female respondent concludes:

*The economic crisis caused serious problems here in London, especially in the financial sector. Since early 2008 my contracts have only lasted a few months [...] hourly salaries are also considerably lower: with 10 years of work experience I am at the same salary level as when I started in 2001. I have been unemployed for 14 months out of the last 36 months—this was unheard of in our line of business before the end of 2007. (ID225, b. 1968, BA in business)*

The change is also visible in the responses of those who are self-employed, and based elsewhere in Europe. A male IT-consultant in Germany explains that since the crash of 2008 his clients were less capable or less willing to pay for services at the same level as earlier: “There has not been any major change, apart from a ten per cent reduction to my fees” (ID27, b. 1973, MA in technology). A change in the availability of freelance work was reported by also others, such as a female music teacher and singer in Spain (ID227, b. 1981, studies music) and a female entrepreneur running her own business in Ireland (ID58, b. 1980, studies Finnish literature). Another respondent, an IT professional from the Netherlands, explains: “On top of being a student I also do freelance work both in IT and photography. There is clearly less work available than in 2008, probably due to the crash of the economy.” (ID150, b. 1977, female, MA in IT, studying design).

The labour market position of these migrants had, therefore, become more precarious and a small minority of respondents had even been forced to re-migrate. Yet, even though during the first two years of the crisis the job market had become more unpredictable, among this migrant group the situation did not trigger a major return or onward migration flow.

## 2.2 The situation improved

The years between the consecutive surveys (2008 to 2010) had not signified a time of uncertainty for all those who participated in the study. In fact, 24 per cent of the respondents stated that their situation had improved, and the crisis had not played a role in their life. Many wrote that they had been promoted, increased their income, found a better job, or been given a permanent contract. When

asked about her work situation, this freelance translator from Spain simply concludes: “It has improved. The crisis has not had any impact whatsoever” (ID267, female, b. 1972, MA in German). As explained in the previous section, the financial sector in London did encounter problems after the 2008 crisis. However, the situation did not affect all business sectors in the same manner as this male respondent explains: “Luckily my work situation has only improved. It appears that, in my field, we benefit from the situation where other companies have to be more prudent with their money. I am not afraid for my job, and I have not started looking elsewhere.” (ID232, b. 1970, MA in economics)

London attracts highly skilled migrants who benefit from having the “London experience” in their CV. As Mulholland and Ryan (2013, p. 4) conclude: “London can be seen to have a structural need for a talent pool that by definition transcends the supply of ‘local labour’. In service of this need, London has effectively marketed itself as a global talent pool able to enhance the human capital of its talented immigrants.” The sheer size of the London labour market underlines the differing contexts and situations present at any given time. While some highly skilled migrants may find themselves ousted from the ‘talent pool’ and thus from access to the best jobs, some others simply benefit from the opportunities on offer. As this respondent concludes: “I have been promoted and the tasks that I am in charge of have more than doubled. With my experience, I think that my situation in the job market is excellent, but I have no plans to change jobs at the moment because I know my input is valued.” (ID71, male, b. 1976, BA in marketing & finance)

Luxembourg is another important European destination that offers job opportunities for highly skilled migrants, be it at a much smaller scale. The jobs available for highly skilled migrants are mainly concentrated in the EU and other related organisations, and the banking sector. The rather arbitrary way in which the economic crisis influenced the situation of highly skilled employees is visible in the reply of this male respondent: “I am a banker. I have been promoted, but many colleagues have lost their jobs. The job market is the worst I have experienced during my career.” (ID250, b. 1976, BA in business) His career was progressing in a satisfactory manner, but the overall mood in his field was pessimistic. Also a female respondent from Luxembourg states that for her the years between the two surveys signified a period of career advancement: “My work situation has changed dramatically during 2008–2010 but only for the better.” (ID254, female, b. 1976, MBA in economics)

Contrasting the experiences of these two groups of respondents—those who state that their situation has worsened and those who state it has improved—



underlines the importance of various contextual factors that are related to the employment sector, city, and country of residence. In addition, the effects on individual migrants seem somewhat random: the highly skilled migrant herself may have very little control over her own situation as some colleagues with similar qualifications are let go, while others keep their jobs and are promoted. The impact of the crisis was clearly severe for some highly skilled Finns, while others with relatively similar education and other background characteristics prospered throughout the turbulent times.

### 2.3 The crisis made no difference

The majority (54%) of the WIE respondents replied that they were personally unaffected: their situation had either not changed or the reasons for the change in jobs or status had nothing to do with the crisis. A rather typical response comes from a male respondent in London: “No change, the labour market situation is good—It was looking worse during the first quarter of 2009, but the third quarter was already better.” (ID204, b. 1978, MA in engineering) Even though the recession had not affected the respondents particularly hard, at least not immediately, many did discuss the effects of the situation on their employer, co-workers or the country’s economy. Another London-based respondent explains: “The recession has not affected me (am still in the same firm) and things are looking good. But the recession is definitely visible in the area where I work as there are many banks, etc. around.” (ID8, male, b. 1974, MA in science and technology)

“The crisis did not affect me personally” narrative, found in the descriptions of a majority of the respondents, testifies to the fact that these migrants did not fall into the category of a labour reserve to be treated differently from native workers during a crisis. The numbers of Finnish citizens moving back to Finland from within the EU-28 actually decreased from 6.258 (2008) to 4.954 (2010) (Statistics Finland, 2017). There are only a handful of cases where unemployment triggered return or onward migration—the reasons for these choices are more often found from other life events. “I moved away from England at the end of 2008 because of family reasons. The economic crisis did not have any effect on my job, and I found a new job in Finland rather quickly” (ID248, b. 1984, UK/Finland, BA), explains a female respondent with a career in the hotel management sector.

Many respondents explain their mobility options in a similar manner: having the perfect job or an abundance of career opportunities is not the only factor that affects one’s choice of where to live. In addition, previous research has

shown that the mobility motivations of those originating from within the EU-15 countries differ from the so-called EU-10 movers who originate from the Eastern and Central European countries. The majority of the EU-10 migrants state economic reasons as the main reasons for mobility, while the EU-15 migrants list lifestyle reasons, personal relationship and search for autonomy and experiences as more important motivators for mobility (Eurobarometer, 2010; Recchi & Triandafyllidou, 2010). These two intra-European migrant groups also differ in their labour market outcomes in the destination country: many of the highly skilled migrants originating from the EU-10 have had to settle for jobs in the low-skilled sector thus filling in the demand for cheap and flexible labour, while it has been easier for the EU-15 movers to find highly skilled jobs (e.g., Glorious *et al.*, 2013). Hence, also the behaviour of these groups during a recession differs: while the financial crisis prompted return and circular migration with the EU-10 migrants, the effect was less dramatic for the EU-15 migrants (Report COM (2011) 729 final; Focus Migration, 2013). In addition, also the economic situation in one's country of origin plays a significant role in migration behaviour, as was the case for those migrants that originate from the Baltic States that were hard hit by the crisis (Krisjane Berzins & Apsite, 2013; see also Zaizeva & Zimmerman, 2012).

### **3. Conclusion**

The research of this article reveals that the high human capital and the intra-European migrant status protected the WIE survey respondents from the immediate effects of the economic crisis. Only 16 per cent of the respondents explain that their labour market situation in 2010 was worse in comparison with the situation prior to the crisis in the spring of 2008. Of these Finns only a handful state that they had personally been fired, had experienced a pay cut, or been forced to relocate abroad. A higher percentage (24%) felt that their labour market situation had improved despite the crisis. The majority (54%) of the respondents had either experienced no change in their situation or had moved or changed jobs due to reasons unrelated to the crisis. In this sense the results are in line with the previously noted fact that highly skilled migrants are in many cases somewhat protected from the full force of the recession's job losses (Orrenius & Zavodny, 2009).

Thus, the Finns who took part in the study navigated through at least the first two years of the crisis rather well. The 18 interviews conducted in 2011 among

selected survey respondents point to the same conclusion: the economic crisis was not stated as a significant cause of unemployment. Two factors help explain this outcome: First, highly skilled migrants often find work in occupations where their foreign nationality is not necessarily a disadvantage. They may move on company careers or work in occupations where trans-national ties and skills are essential. Large employers, such as multinational companies, consultancy, and accountancy firms, non-governmental organisations and EU institutions, for example, seek to employ workers with different backgrounds. Also, many of the WIE study participants reported that their language and intercultural communication skills, varied educational backgrounds, and contacts to the Scandinavian area were among the reasons that they were hired (Koikkalainen, 2013). Therefore, the fear of foreign nationals being the first ones let go does not necessarily ring true with these kinds of migrants working in international workplaces.

Second, many of the participants of this study worked as freelancers gaining income from several sources, or due to their relatively young age, alternated between studying, taking care of children, and working. Whenever financially possible, deciding to continue one's studies or stay at home with children are ways in which to manoeuvre through times when job opportunities are not so readily available. The kinds of Finns that took part in the survey appear to be rather flexible in the labour market and many do not plan their life around one career track, employer—or even country. This attitude towards the future was visible also in the survey question regarding their future plans, where 40 per cent thought it likely that they would have moved either back to Finland or to some other foreign country in three years' time (Koikkalainen, 2013).

The migrants were, therefore, somewhat protected from the crisis by their high human capital, flexibility of alternating between studying and work, employment in international workplaces and their intra-European migrant status. While the blunt force of the crisis did not hit this rather privileged migrant group particularly hard at the onset of the crisis, it did have an impact on their career advancement prospects and sense of security. Many note that their workload has increased, and they can no longer be certain that there are other jobs available, should they become unemployed. Even after the eurozone crisis, the free movement area in Europe continues to attract those willing to live abroad, such as the 6,500 to 7,300 Finnish citizens leaving for EU-28 countries each year (Statistics Finland, 2017). Yet, while the doors to the European labour market are open to highly skilled individuals, the slow economic growth has signified that it may require more effort to find the perfect job opportunity or career path abroad.

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